

“A Road Can Mean Life”

Fueling Economic Recovery with Community Development in Serbia

By Tamara Jovovic & Christopher Wild

By harnessing the creativity, energy and vision of community members, stakeholders and ACDI/VOCA staff, economic recovery initiatives are flourishing under the auspices of the Community Revitalization through Democratic Action (CRDA) program in Central Serbia. CRDA is a five-year, USAID-funded \$40 million community development program to design, implement and monitor over 900 projects that revitalize essential infrastructure, create income-generating opportunities and address critical environmental and social problems.

While its principal mission has been bolstering citizen and community participation in local decision making and fostering cohesion within and across communities, the Community Revitalization through Democratic Action (CRDA) program has also had a visible economic impact on communities still bearing the effects of the civil strife, political instability and economic sanctions that have hindered Serbia’s economic development since the 1990s. Through projects prioritized, designed and developed directly by communities, CRDA has generated employment opportunities, expanded local production, processing and marketing capacity, and supported infrastructure rehabilitation critical to the revitalization and development of local trade in Central Serbia. ACDI/VOCA staff and partners credit at least part of this success to the nature of the CRDA program which encourages the intensive use of local resources not only in the design but also in the implementation of community projects, and considers their overall impact on the communities’ economic well-being and recovery potential. There are three different, yet complementary, ways in which the CRDA program advances economic recovery in Central Serbia.

The first is through the program’s traditional economic component, or “pillar,” which is devoted to implementing economic projects designed by community boards. By nature, these projects are predominantly related to agricultural and business development and, since CRDA projects are community-driven, they often capture and realize the visions the young have for the future of their families and villages. “I had a vision of what I would like to do in agriculture, but I didn’t have money to start anything. That’s why I’ve been thinking about moving to the city like many of my friends,” says Boban Pljakić, a 22-year-old man from the village of Stubal.



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Recognizing the need to reinvigorate their breeding stock, the Stubal community board submitted a proposal to purchase and distribute ten purebred pigs to five households. Within the upcoming year, an additional 50 households will receive highbred pigs, benefiting not only the farmers, but also feed producers, the food processing industry and consumers. It was this project that convinced young Boban that his village could provide him a future.

Economic recovery is fueled further by the economic impact of projects from the remaining three CRDA pillars: infrastructure, civic participation and environment, which positively affect local commerce and create employment opportunities. For instance, a newly paved road enables fruit farmers to safely and quickly deliver their perishable products to market, decreasing damage related to transport and increasing profits. A similar project between the villages of Plaskovac and Meterize effectively lowered maintenance costs for Mališa Živojinović’s delivery truck, while simultaneously increasing customer access to his bakery. “Now I can work. I can

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deliver my bread and croissants faster, and the main towns are closer,” says Mališa. “Furthermore, customers can now come to me more easily.” Meanwhile, a newly established daycare center equipped by CRDA has created eight new full-time and three part-time jobs for teachers and nurses in the town of Jagodina while also giving unemployed parents the opportunity to search for work. In addition to increasing sales from trade and creating jobs, these activities all generate employment for dozens of engineers, architects, construction workers and local vendors.

In response to the growing needs of internally displaced persons from Kosovo and refugees from Croatia and Bosnia in Central Serbia, ACDI/VOCA has also distributed \$400,000 in \$500 to \$1,000 grants to 415 entrepreneurs and small businesses in a variety of sectors. The Nekić family, who relocated in 1999 from Kosovo to Serbia, received carpentry and drilling tools and a molder from CRDA. Thanks to this equipment and their own personal investment, the Nekićs are preparing to register a furniture production workshop.

In a follow-up initiative, ACDI/VOCA has allocated an additional \$125,000 to 29 enterprises from the group that received grants during the previous year. These enterprises, which successfully completed their activity plans and were willing to satisfy a new set of criteria, have each received up to \$3,000 in additional support. To ensure that the entrepreneurs could effectively adjust to their businesses’ new production and processing capacities and gain access to additional capital, ACDI/VOCA sponsored a two-day training seminar on business management and financial planning and linked the entrepreneurs to microfinance organizations operating in Serbia.

“We wish to expand our activities, and our plans are very ambitious. We don’t wait for the customers to come to us anymore—we go to them” concludes Vladan Petrović, a member of the Paraplegic Association of Čačak and an employee of an engraving workshop that received an engraving kit, two computers and furniture as part of the CRDA program. His enthusiasm captures the renewed energy and hope reverberating through many ACDI/VOCA-assisted communities in Central Serbia. As community involvement in CRDA strengthens with experience and ACDI/VOCA’ technical assistance, the economic impacts of its projects will only continue to grow.

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